carl schurz high school

Preliminary Summary of Information
April 7, 1978

Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks

of walking in and around Chicago resulted in the formation of a hiking club of prominent citizens, with whom he walked through the lovely wooded areas surrounding the city. This love of nature and a deisre to preserve it, along with a strong sense of public spiritedness resulted in what was later to become the Cook County Forest Preserve system. The same prominent citizens who belonged to the club were cajoled into using their influence to preserve the sixty-one square miles of parks that Chicago still enjoys. Strangely, although Perkins was the driving force behind the preservation of the land, only a very small park in Evanston bears his name.

Based on earlier school construction, Perkins was appointed Board of Education Architect in 1905, at an annual salary of $8,000. In spite of difficulties with the Board, one of Perkins's successes was to implement larger classrooms. Originally, classrooms were 30' x 22' and designed to accommodate 40 students. Perkins increased this to 36 1/2' x 23' for the same number of pupils. Perkins was also able to hold building costs down in comparison to other large cities of the time. While costs in Chicago were figured at 15¢ a square foot, the same structure in St. Louis cost 17-19¢, and in New York and Boston ranged from 21-25¢. At this time, however, new regulations for the fireproofing of schools were increasing building costs. Perkins felt the solution could be found in simpler rather that smaller structures. He eliminated fancy cornices and used masonry patterns for decoration.

Concurrent with the new construction standards and rising costs, Alfred R. Urion, general counsel for the Armour Company, became the new president of the school board. He immeidately leveled charges of extravagance at Perkins regarding the expenditures for new construction. Urion was also against the notion of designing schools as unique structures; to placate him Perkins designed a standard school. The small version had 24 rooms and could be built for $175,000. The larger was 32 rooms at a cost of $210,000. Urion, still dissatisfied, accused Perkins of mismanagement of the department's time and money. At the time these charges were made, Carl Schurz High School was already under construction. Perkins had designed and completed construction on: Albert G. Lane Technical High School; the Bernard Moos School; the Stephen K. Hayt Elementary School; the George W. Tilton School; the Rogers School; and the Jesse Spaulding School for Crippled Children, among others. Hearings were held on the charges, and the ouster vote of the school board trustees was passed in April of 1910. Perkins had not expected the descion to go any differently, and returned to private practice.

In private practice Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton became widely known as designers of school structures, responsible for almost as many school buildings as the current firm of Perkins (his son Lawrence) and Will. Perkins continued with his civic activities - the Munici-

pal Art Commission, Chicago Regional Planning Association, of which he was founder, the Metropolitan Park System - and architecture. He died in retirement in Pasadena, California in 1941.

Carl Schurz High School began in 1872 as Jefferson Township High School. Jefferson Township was the seat of government for most of what is now Chicago's Northwest Side. The high school opened for the fall term in 1872, the first secondary school to be established following the enactment of a bill enabling townships to open such schools. By this time there were already 10 grammar schools in the area, evidencing the need for a secondary school. Additionally, the new villages of Irving Park and Montrose promised to increase the number of students in the area; along with the influx of new settlers following the Chicago Fire the year before.

The school opened on the second floor of the town hall, located at the intersection known as Six Corners (Cicero, Milwaukee, and Irving Park Road). The police and fire departments were housed on the first floor. In 1883 the school relocated to a new, three-story structure, complete with Victorian flourishes, at the corner of Wilson and Knox Avenues. This site later became the home of Mayfair College. (Now Harry S Truman College.) The high school continued to serve Jefferson Township until 1889, when the area was annexed to the City of Chicago. The school was renamed Jefferson High School at Mayfair. (Township was dropped from the name with annexation.)

A secondary education for youngsters was unusual at this point in Chicago's history. Most students left school to work. The curriculum at Jefferson High School was geared to prepare students for college, unusual for the time considering how few pupils went on to college. Many of the students during the first decades of the school's existence came from the prominent families of the area. These families were the township's original settlers, who eventually subdivided and sold their farms. Records of the school's township years no longer exist, but later records show that the class of 1885, the first graduating class in the new structure, consisted of one student, Ellen Hazelton. The following year, 1886, the class was composed of her borther Hugh and Edward Westlake. The final graduating class of Jefferson High School, 1910, consisted of 44 students.

Expanding population and increased enrollment led to the construction of a new school. The drawings for the new school were signed on October 21, 1908. A civic official of German heritage pushed to name the school after Carl Schurz, who died in 1906. The German-born Schurz had been a journalist and orator, friend of Abraham Lincoln, state senator, and ambassador to Spain. While Schurz was unconnected with Chicago education, his wife Margarethe opened the nation's first kindergarden in 1856, in Watertown, Wisconsin. Residents were upset with the school's new name, many prefering to retain

the old township name for the school. Others felt the honor should go to John Gray, a long-time resident of the area and a member of Chicagds first Board of School Inspectors. Grayland, an area east of Milwaukee Avenue, west of Laramie, between Addison and Irving Park, was part of the extensive Gray farm. Schurz High School's eight acre complex occupies the site of the farmhouse and out-buildings. Shortly after World War II, a section of sidewalk near the north (Waveland Avenue) side of the building caved in, revealing a tunnel. School officials surmised that the tunnel may have been a way station on the underground railroad, used to shelter and feed runaway slaves on their journey farther north.

When Carl Schurz High School opened, 1,031 students were enrolled. The college prep curriculum had been replaced with one of a more general nature, and the new building had space for manual arts instruction, along with the traditional liberal arts classrooms. Enrollment so increased that a new wing (the south wing at Addison Street) was added to the school in 1915. Although the Board of Education built four additional high schools for the northwest side, construction was not begun soon enough so it became necessary, in 1923, to build the north wing of the school at Waveland Avenue, and the "Triangle" at the rear of the structure.

Perkins's designs were a departure from school architecture of the time. Previously, most school buildings were essentially boxes of a very conventional style. Exterior detailing - Rennaisance capitals, iron cornices - gave them architectural "effects," but had no structural or design significance. Additionally, these details needlessly increased the cost of the school. Perkins used only brick, terra cotta and stone, and used them as functional materials, the designs and patterns created being organic rather than added on; very much in keeping with the Chicago School style. The entire building is done in red/brown brick. The use of brown mortar resulted in an unbroken expanse of building. Perkins used specific materials in order to enhance his designs, rather than build with what materials were currently fashionable. Frank Lloyd Wright shared this feeling about the organic properties of construction materials.

Carl Schurz High School is fortunate to sit on a large, triangular lot. It was built at a time when the Board of Education was just begining to surround schools with land for recreational purposes. Bounded by Milwaukee Avenue on the west, Addison Street on the south, Tripp on the east and Waveland Avenue on the north, the school is effectively removed from the noise and distractions of street traffic. The immediate area surrounding the school is varied in character. The blocks west of the school are given over to light industry and trucking. Addison Street has many neighborhood shops, some catering directly to the needs of the high school population. The remainder of the area is basically residential, composed mostly of brick three-

flats and apartment blocks. The school is set back on a well landscaped lot. Prior to a Dpression era WPA beautification project, the grounds were refered to as the "dust bowl" and used for atheletic practice. The school seems removed from the urban bustle around it.

Perkins's original design was for a rectangular, four-story building set east and west on the lot. In keeping with Perkins's theories about light, the corner and central classrooms have windows on only one side. While he agreed that there were advantages to constant north light, Perkins also felt sunshine to be beneficial. Consequently, he felt the proper placement of windows to be full east and full west. In the morning one side of the school would experience sunshine and light, while the other side received light similar to a northern exposure. In the afternoon the situation was reversed. While all classrooms have outside windows, the central corridors and stairs were designed to be artificially lighted.

The roof on the school is similar to that on the Jesse Spaulding School for Crippled Children, an earlier work of Perkins's. The large, many-leveled roof with spreading eaves, red tile, and green copper trim creates a strong horizontal motion across the school. A stringcourse on the first floor echoes the roof line. This is balanced by closely spaced, false, brick piers running the height of the building. Windows occur similarly on all floors, parallel to the piers. The piers terminate in stone cornices. The multi-level, intersecting planes are reminicent of Frank Lloyd Wright's work of the time. The use of false piers was introduced by Louis Sullivan, who had placed them between true piers to accentuate a vertical pattern. In Schurz High School, the vertical pattern is terminated one story below the roof line by a stone course rumming the length of the building.

Perkins's original drawings indicate the north and south additions to the school. However, they appear as separated, free-standing structures, creating an "open campus" effect. When Perkins was dismissed in 1910, he was replaced by A.F. Hussander. Hussander was the architect for the south (Addison) wing of the school, built in 1915 to accommodate the growing student population. While the wing was attached directly to the main building, ignoring Perkins's earlier drawings, it repeats scrupulously the same design and proportions used by the original architect. Both buildings (and the later additions) are a combination of bearing wall and steel skeleton on stepped footing construction.

The triangular addition and north wing of the building were both planned in 1923. John C. Christensen was the architect. Both additions were attached to the main building, again ignoring Perkins's conception. While Christensen duplicated Perkins's exterior design faithfully, he departed from the style inside the structures. Perkins had built cleanly within the school. In Christensen's design interior detailing and

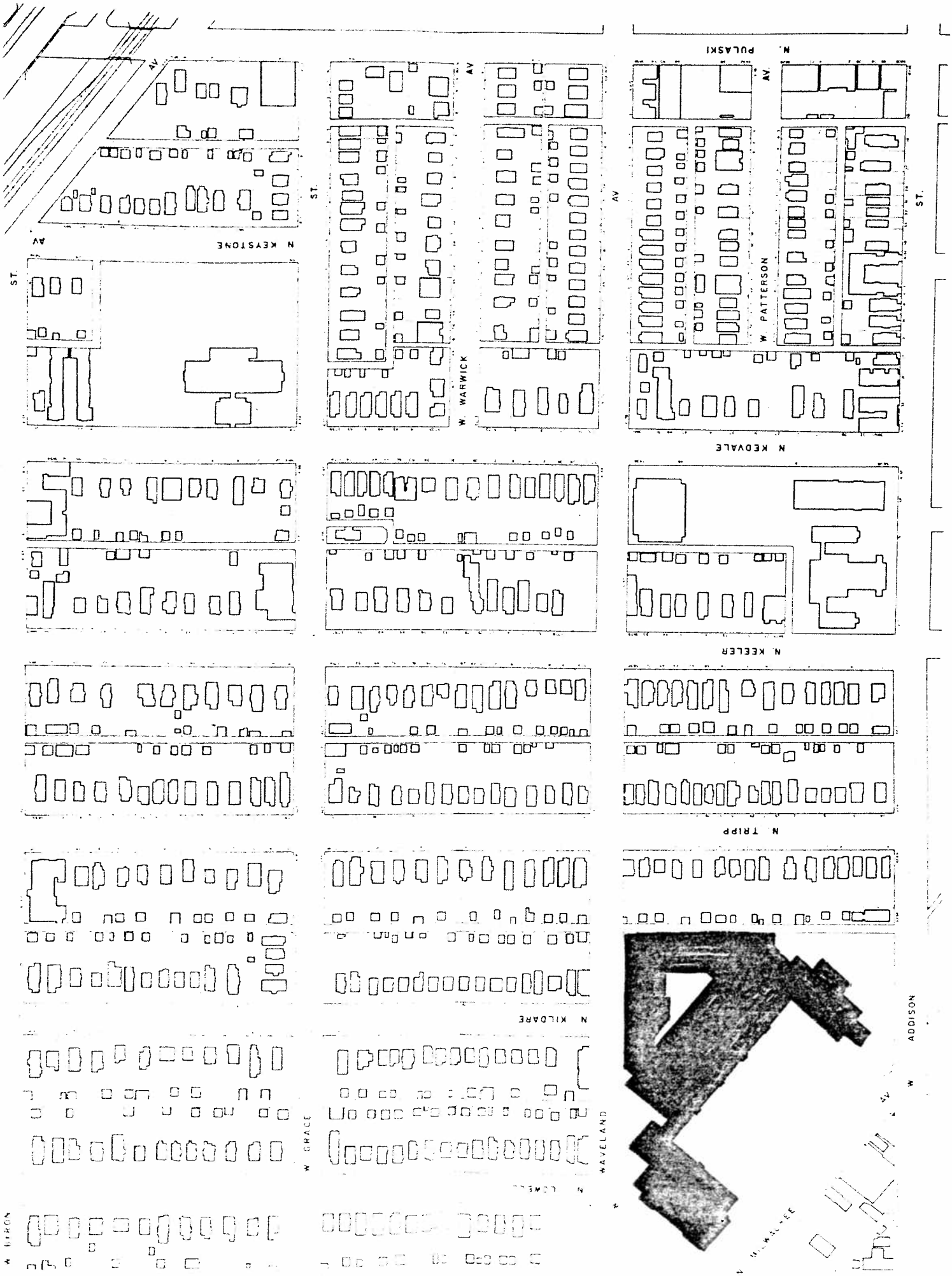
decoration appear that is incongruous with the rest of the building. In the north wing auditorium, the proscenium is reminicent of the more florid periods of the Rennaisance. Some terra cotta detailing was left off and more attention paid to column capitals and tacked-on decorations.

In addition to a general curriculum, Schurz took great pride in its manual arts division. Perkins's drawings called for a darkroom, a textiles arts and "loom room," printing and bookbinding shops, drafting rooms (many of the original tables are still in use), and clay modeling rooms. The plans of the south wing call for a girl's gymnasium and a swimming pool, a very unusual feature for the time. Since Perkins had indicated this wing on his original drawings, there is some chance that he discussed the possibility of a swimming pool. If so, it would be in keeping with Perkins's theory that it was the responsibility of the public school to serve more of the population than just the student body. He envisioned schools as community centers when classes were not in session. Holding to this notion, Carl Schurz evening school is the oldest in the city.

The interior of the school is remarkably well preserved. The original wooden framing around doors heating grates, blackboards and the built in cubboards and shelves are all in their original state. All of the iron detailing on the stairwells and windows is intact.

The auditorium holds that largest pipe organ in the Midwest. It was installed in 1936 and remains in excellent condition. The old auditorium in the main building was converted to a library after the additions were built. During 1940-41, muralist Gustav Brand and some thirty students designed and completed ceiling murals. Brand had come from Germany in 1892, commissioned by the Imperial government to paint the murals for the German Exhibition Hall at the Columbian Exposition, and later did panels for the Auditorium Theater. At Schurz, four panels depict "The Development of the Written Word," describing progress from stoneage man to the Gutenburg press. An additional 27 panels portray famous figures of arts and letters, Goethe, Chopin, Lincoln, Pasteur, and even Jane Addams and Carl Schurz appear.

Carl Schurz High School today looks like Carl Schurz High School when it was built. The exterior of the building has been admirably maintained. Tuckpointing and exterior wall cleaning goes on regularly. Replacement terra cotta tiles have been matched to the originals. Trees and landscaping add to, rather than block, the architectural featrues of the school. Where changes, due to curriculum and technology, were made on the interior, great effort and care was taken to retain as much of the old as possible.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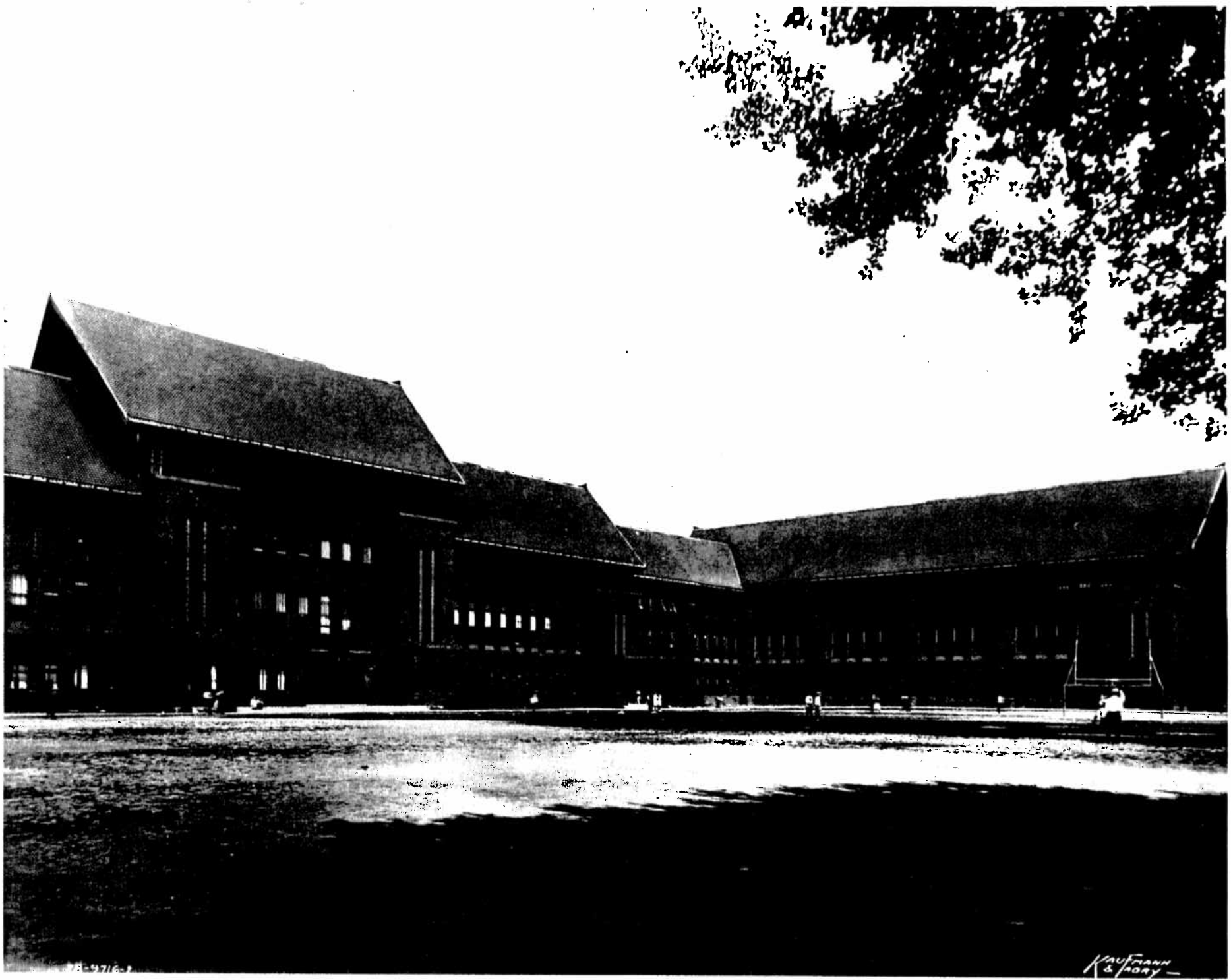
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